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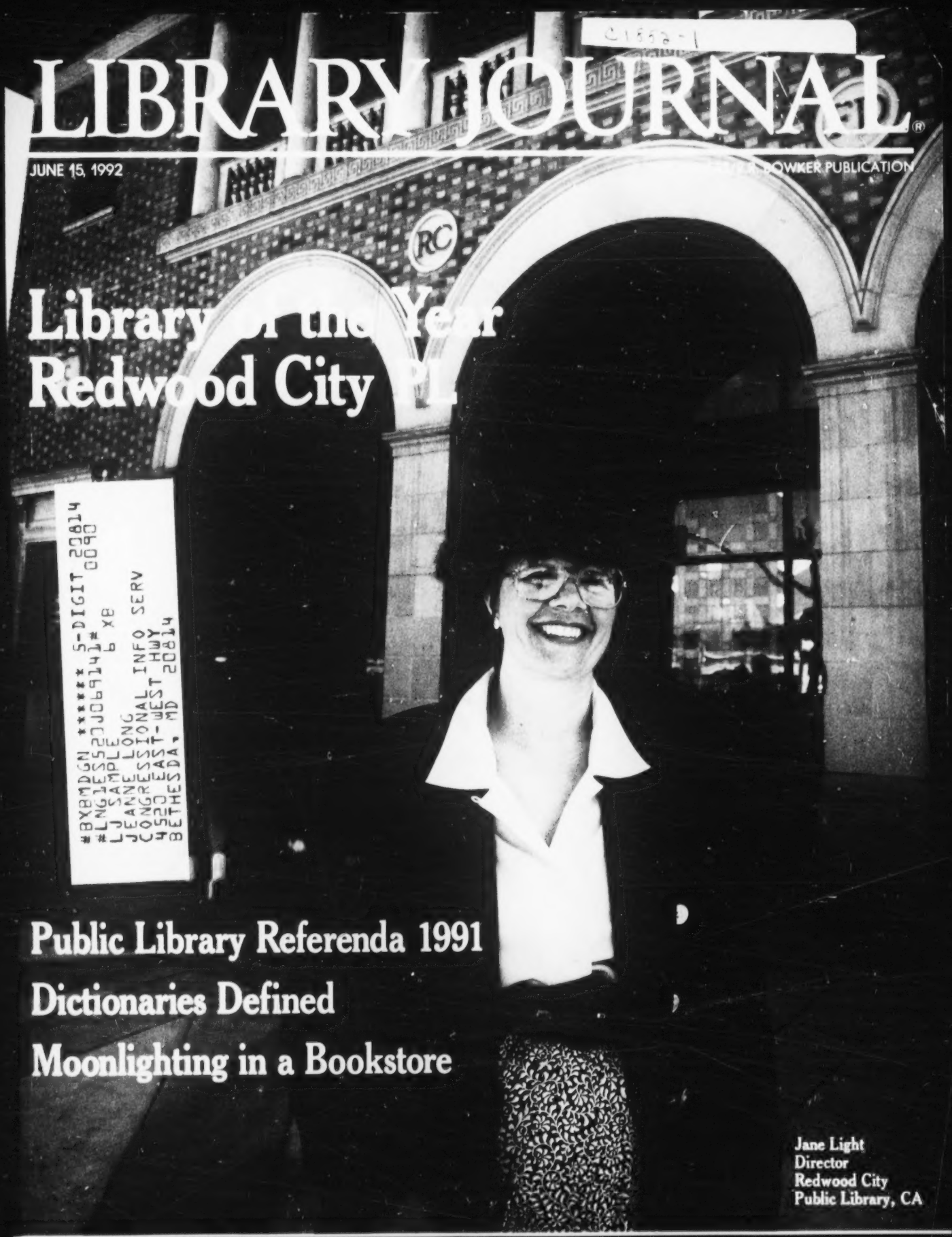

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□FEATURES□

Redwood City Public Library: Library of the Year 1992 32
BY JOHN BERRY California library wins first Gale/*LJ* award for service, vision, and excellence

85 Percent Approved Public Library Referenda 1991 36
BY RICHARD B. HALL Forty-six libraries held referenda in 1991, and 39 succeeded

Dictionaries Defined 43
BY KEN KISTER A reference expert offers guidelines on how to buy a good dictionary

What I Learned Working in a Bookstore 47
BY DAVE STRICKLER An academic librarian picks up some tips moonlighting in the other place for books

□COLUMNS□

White Papers 49
BY HERBERT S. WHITE Researchers, Teachers, and Trainers

The Futurecast 51
BY RAYMOND KURZWEIL The Paradigms and Paradoxes of Intelligence. Part 1: Russell's Paradox

□NEWS□

Late Bulletins 11
Crismond lashes out; ALA counters

News 14
Crismond resignation unleashes emotional and legal reactions

Automation News 26
National Online Meeting addresses hard times

The Redwood City Public Library has been selected as the first Gale/LJ Library of the Year. This California library offers the service, creativity, and leadership that exemplifies the best in our nation's libraries. See its story on p. 32.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK BROWNE

June 15, 1992

JOURNAL

□REVIEWS□

Review Contents 55

Prepub Alert 56
Two labors of love: *The Midwife's Advice* and *The Stork Club*

Prepub Best Sellers 63
Counting on *Scruples Two, Seven for a Secret, Double Deuce* to hit big

Inside Track 65
Responsible Reviewing

Reference 68
The Dickson Word Treasury will enrich your language

Arts & Humanities 74
"Trade Comics": ten examples of comic art as literature

Social Sciences 82
Czech out Havel's *Summer Meditations*

Science & Technology 94
Where can you find *Real Beer & Good Eats*?

Fiction 100
Vizenor reawakens *Dead Voices*

Classic Returns 106
Bradley's *The Inheritor* haunts us in hardcover

Professional Reading 107
Singing his praises: Pierce Butler and *The Gospel of Scholarship*

Magazines 108
Offering a new focus on an old photography magazine

Video Reviews 111
Adventure films from the 1950s now on video

Video Movies 114
Now it's our turn to stone *JFK*

Audio Reviews 116
Danny Thomas's friends read his biography

Index 121
Book Review, Classic Returns, & Professional Reading

Word of Mouth 128
Librarians select sleepers: a reader's advisory

□DEPARTMENTS□

Editorial 6
The Right Stuff for ALA

Literacy Clearinghouse 29
BY NANCY HARVEY DAVIS & PAM FITZGERALD

Ready Reference 31
Methods that work for librarians

Index to Advertisers 4

Letters 8

People 30

Classified 122

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85 Percent Approved

Public Library Referenda *1991*

By Richard B. Hall

DESPITE WIDESPREAD cuts to library budgets, 85 percent of the referenda to build or renovate public libraries held between July 1, 1990 and June 30, 1991 passed. On this front at least, the future of libraries is still relatively bright. The success rate is slightly above the 80 percent success rate for the combined data collected for the period 1987–91. The long-term data continue to show that the chances of success for library capital campaigns are approximately four to one. It will be interesting to see if there is a significant change next year when the data more fully reflect our national recession.

In 1991, the level of funds voters were asked to approve increased dramatically, from $183 million in 1990 to $348 million. A five-year summary of referenda (Table 2, p. 42) shows that a total of $1.3 billion has been voted on during 1987–91, with an average of approximately $260 million per year. Only in 1989 was the figure higher than in 1991. As this summary shows, there is not enough data to determine a general trend but only a series of "peaks and valleys" showing the rise and fall of the amount of funding proposed in referenda for library construction nationwide. Interestingly, this contrasts with the relatively stable number of referenda reported for the past five years—an average of 49 per year.

Of the $348 million attempted in 1991, $315 million (90 percent) was approved and approximately $33 million (ten percent) was turned down by voters. The 90 percent amount approved is a big improvement over 1990 and well above the five-year combined amount of 80 percent. It is encouraging to see that the vast majority of funds requested by the referenda process for public library facilities have been approved by the voters. In the past five years alone, over $1 billion has been approved for public library construction projects.

In this year's survey, a total of 46 local referenda were reported (see Table 1), with 39 passing and only seven failing. When the percentages of votes for and against all of the 1991 referenda are averaged, the national percentage of passage is 63 percent, which is slightly below the five-year combined data rate of 64 percent—just short of a two-thirds approval rate. Further, the five-year data show that the rate has consistently remained between 60 and 70 percent.

A Florida tale of woe

The referenda story is by no means all good news. The failure of the three referenda in Florida struck an unpleasant chord. Director Robert Lipscomb of the Central Florida Regional Library in Ocala and Director James Wheeler of the Volusia County Public Library System in Daytona Beach (the New Smyrna Beach Brannon Memorial Branch and the proposed Port Orange Regional Library are both part of this system) offered some explanations for the results but neither showed optimism about the future of Florida libraries.

Lipscomb cited a poor climate in Florida for any increased government spending. Though his library mounted a well-organized, modestly proposed campaign, an equally well-organized opposition (from big business to people not wanting to increase their taxes) helped defeat it. The Gulf War and the resultant rise in gas prices didn't help either. Said Lipscomb, "We won't witness a successful bond referendum in Florida for several years."

Wheeler's is a countywide system where people in the cities are asked to fund buildings used by residents outside the local taxing district. The county council will now have to address a new manner of funding. The defense industry and tourism are suffering in this region, and in this election year, no officials will sponsor new taxes of any kind. Though the population of Florida has more than doubled in the past 20 years, the library square footage per capita is below the national standard.

[In-depth profiles of successful referenda campaigns at the Spokane Public Library and Denver Public Library appear in two sidebars on the following four pages. The analysis of the data continues on p. 42.]

Richard B. Hall is Library Construction Bond Act Manager, California State Library, Sacramento

Table 1: Referenda for Public Library Buildings 1991

Community	Library	Vote		Amount of Referendum	General Special	Other Ballot Items
		For	Against			
CALIFORNIA						
Los Altos	Santa Clara Cty. Lib.	74 %	26 %	$3,715,000	G	Y
Oakland	Oakland PL	81	19	1,500,000	G	Y
Rolling Hills Estates	Palos Verdes Lib.	70	30	16,000,000	G	N
COLORADO						
Denver	Denver PL	75	25	91,600,000	G	Y
FLORIDA						
*New Smyrna Beach	Brannon Memorial Lib.	31	69	3,400,000	S	N
*Ocala	Central Florida Reg. Lib.	30	70	14,100,000	G	N
*Port Orange	Port Orange Reg. Lib.	42	58	3,100,000	S	N
GEORGIA						
Quitman	Brooks Cty. Lib.	57	43	336,442	G	Y
IDAHO						
Hayden	Kootenai Cty. Libs.	83	17	2,400,000	S	N
*Council Bluffs	Free PL	46	54	4,900,000	S	N
IOWA						
Boone	Ericson PL	71	29	2,700,000	S	Y
KANSAS						
Norton	Norton PL	77	23	650,000	G	N
LOUISIANA						
St. Martinville	St. Martin Parish Lib.	72	28	1,825,000	G	N
MARYLAND						
Hyattsville	Prince George's Cty. Mem.	75	25	12,867,000	G	Y
Towson	Baltimore Cty. PL	56	44	2,050,000	G	Y
MASSACHUSETTS						
Halifax	Holmes PL	71	29	389,000	S	Y
Kingston	Frederic C. Adams PL	99	1	75,000	G	Y
West Tisbury	West Tisbury PL	64	36	95,000	G	Y
Weston	Weston PL	100	0	3,700,000	G	Y
MICHIGAN						
Marlette	Marlette District Lib.	75	25	120,000	G	N
MINNESOTA						
Ada	Ada PL	58	42	250,000	S	N
Benson	Benson PL	54	46	250,000	S	N
Rochester	Rochester PL	59	41	14,000,000	G	Y
NEVADA						
Las Vegas	Las Vegas/Clark Cty. Lib.	51	49	70,000,000	G	Y
NEW YORK						
Farmingdale	Farmingdale PL	56	44	8,820,000	S	N
Hewlett	Hewlett-Woodmere PL	56	44	775,000	G	N
NORTH CAROLINA						
*Chapel Hill	Chapel Hill PL	49	51	3,000,000	G	N
Greensboro	Greensboro PL	65	35	16,060,000	G	Y
OHIO						
Garettsville	Portage Cty. District Lib.	54	46	910,000	G	Y
Tipp City	Tipp City PL	67	33	300,000	G	N
Twinsburg	Twinsburg PL	75	25	2,600,000	S	N
Willoughby	Willoughby-Eastlake PL	57	43	4,000,000	G	N
OKLAHOMA						
Stillwater	Stillwater PL	67	33	4,980,000	S	N
OREGON						
Lincoln City	Driftwood Lib. of Lincoln City	63	37	600,000	G	N
PENNSYLVANIA						
*Dresher	Upper Dublin PL	45	55	3,500,000	G	Y
SOUTH CAROLINA						
Conway	Horry Cty. PL	100	0	4,000,000	S	Y
TENNESSEE						
Kingston	Kingston City Lib.	61	39	564,000	G	N
TEXAS						
Baytown	Sterling Municipal Lib.	64	36	1,870,700	S	Y
Grand Prairie	Grand Prairie Mem. Lib.	54	46	2,700,000	S	Y
Plano	Plano PL	51	49	6,600,000	S	Y
San Marcos	San Marcos PL	53	47	2,135,000	G	Y
VIRGINIA						
*Christiansburg	Montgomery-Floyd Reg. Lib.	46	54	1,400,000	G	Y
Fredericksburg	Central Rappahannock Lib.	56	44	1,350,000	G	Y
WASHINGTON						
Ferndale	Ferndale Lib.	63	37	1,250,000	G	Y
Spokane	Spokane PL	65	35	28,883,000	G	N
Vancouver	Fort Vancouver Reg. Lib.	64	36	2,100,000	S	Y
TOTALS	**45**	**53 %**	**37 %**	**$348,420,142**	**G65%/S35%**	**Y54%/N46%**

*Referenda that failed

Public Library Referenda 1991

In 1991, 65 percent of the referenda were held during general elections, which is slightly above the five-year combined percentage of 64 percent. In comparing the success rates of referenda held during special elections and those held during general elections, it appears that special elections have an edge overall for the five-year period. Yet in 1991, referenda held during general elections fared slightly better. This year, 81 percent of the referenda held during special elections passed compared to 87 percent of those held during general elections. This is comparable with the combined five-year success rate of 83 percent for special elections and 78 percent for general elections. Of the seven referenda that failed in 1991, 57 percent (four) of them were held during general elections. In contrast, of the 50 unsuccessful referenda held over the five-year data collection period, 70 percent were held during general elections.

Seasonal considerations

While special elections may have a slight advantage over general elections for library capital campaigns, the time of the year of the election also seems to have an impact on the probability of success. Table 3 shows the percentage of referenda that passed or failed during the four seasons.

For the combined data, summer, fall, and winter all have, on average, a success rate of just below 90 percent. The only significant variation is for the spring, which drops to only 68 percent. Of the referenda that failed, 62 percent were held in the spring. While the data for 1991 do not show this deviation in the spring, it is worthwhile to continue to monitor the seasonal success rate since only five years of data have been collected. However, it appears that a trend in the data may be emerging, and for this reason, library boards may want to exercise caution before proceeding with a referendum in the spring.

With respect to competition from other capital improvement items on the ballot, in 1991, 92 percent of those with competition passed, while only 76 percent of the referenda without competition passed. This is an unusual turn of events for 1991. For the five-year combined data, 77 percent passed with competition and 81 percent passed without competition. Looking back over the individual years of data collection, there are substantial differences in these percentages. But when the five years' worth of data are taken as a whole, the variation does not appear to be particularly significant, though those referenda without competition appear to have a slight advantage.

Table 4 shows the allocation of the referenda by the authorizing agency. For the combined data, municipalities lead with 42 percent. When combined with New England towns, the figure increases to 60 percent. For the remaining referenda, counties account for 16 percent, school and library districts for 11 and nine percent, respectively—a total of another 36 percent—with four percent spread out over various miscellaneous authorities.

Bonds are still in

Bond issues continue to be the most popular method of financing public library buildings. Eighty-three percent of the referenda for 1991 and 82 percent for the combined years of 1987–91 resulted in the issuance of bonds. As in the past, almost all of the bond issues were for general obligation (GO) bonds. For the five-year combined data, 12 percent of the referenda were followed by specific property (millage, etc.) tax increases to cover the costs of the buildings and four percent of the referenda resulted in an increase in the sales tax. The remainder resulted in mortgages or excise taxes.

The use of referenda to fund capital improvements for public libraries appears to have been alive and well in 1991. There are phenomenal success stories being reported from all over the country, like those in Spokane and Denver, which have recently tasted the fruits of victory with very significant approval rates of 65 and 75 percent, respectively (see p. 38 and 40). In both cases, library supporters assessed their local situations, planned accordingly by establishing a strategy, and then implemented a campaign that communicated the campaign message to the voters in an effective and efficient manner. It is particularly important to note that in each of these campaigns, understanding the community, as well as community involvement in both the needs assessment and the campaign, was critical to success.

Table 3: Referenda Pass/Fail Ratio by Season

	Data 1991		Data 1987–91	
Season	Pass	Fail	Pass	Fail
Spring	83%	17%	68%	32%
Summer	100	0	89	11
Fall	81	19	86	14
Winter	83	17	91	9

Table 4: Library Referenda by Authorizing Agency

Agency	1991 Data	1987–91 Combined Data
Municipality	41%	42%
New England town	11	18
County	20	16
School district	11	11
Library district	13	9
Township	0	1
City/County	2	1
Parish	2	1
Village	0	.5
Special Authorities	0	.5

Table 2: Five-Year Summary of Referenda for Public Library Buildings

		Percentage		Amount	Vote		Election		Other Ballot Items	
Year	No.	Pass	Fail		For	Against	Gen.	Spec.	Yes	No
1991	46	85%	15%	$348,420,142	63%	37%	65%	35%	54%	46%
1990	49	80	20	182,755,394	65	35	59	41	51	49
1989	51	75	25	394,759,648	61	39	65	35	41	59
1988	45	64	36	136,475,602	61	39	60	40	58	42
1987	54	93	7	241,927,899	69	31	69	31	67	33
ALL	245	80	20	1,306,338,685	64	36	64	36	54	46
AVG.	49			261,267,737						

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